

# LANGUAGE IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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*Abstract: The present paper seeks to debate the issue of language in the era of globalization. The use of English is expanding in continental Europe as a direct result of globalisation. This affects commerce (greater use of English as a corporate language and in advertising), the military (a reshaping of Nato), science, education, the media, and youth culture. The use of English is also increasing in the institutions of the European Union.*

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## 1. Introduction

Language is implicated in one or more significant ways in every major development that is discussed under the heading of globalization: the demographic and social changes engendered by migration, the shift to a knowledge and services economy, the contested political position of the nation state, and the new forms of sociopolitical resistance that globalization calls forth.

### 1.1. What is globalization?

The term “globalization” has acquired considerable emotive force. Some view it as a process that is beneficial—a key to future world economic development—and also inevitable and irreversible. Others regard it with hostility, even fear, believing that it increases inequality within and between nations, threatens employment and living standards and thwarts social progress. Globalization offers extensive opportunities for truly worldwide development but it is not progressing evenly. Some countries are becoming integrated into the global economy more quickly than others. Countries that have been able to integrate are seeing faster growth and reduced poverty.

Economic “globalization” is a historical process, the result of human innovation and technological progress. It refers to the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and financial flows. The term sometimes also refers to the movement of people (labor) and knowledge (technology) across international borders.

At its most basic, there is nothing mysterious about globalization. The term has come into common usage since the 1980s, reflecting technological advances that have made it easier and quicker to complete international transactions—both trade and financial flows. It refers to an extension beyond national borders of the same market forces that have operated for centuries at all levels of human economic activity—village markets, urban industries, or financial centers.

## 2. English versus other languages

In the 17th century, educated people across central Europe could still communicate with each other in Latin. By the mid-19th century, the handiest language for a traveller through *Mitteleuropa* was the German spoken by the Habsburg monarchs who reigned over Hungarians, Czechs and many others. A little more than 100 years later, the dominant tongue was Russian. Now the region's new

language of choice for the 21st century is percolating upwards through the education system, and downwards from the business and political elite. It will be English, studied by three out of four secondary-school pupils from the Baltic to the Balkans.

Most central European countries have just joined, or are waiting to join, the European Union, and their accession is already reinforcing the dominance of English as a language for the EU as a whole. In central Europe, as in much of the world, knowledge of English has become a basic skill of modern life comparable with the ability to drive a car or use a personal computer.

What has happened to the other main languages? Russian remains the second-most-studied foreign language in the Baltic countries, where there are large minorities of native Russian speakers and a thriving Russophone culture with them. But in Poland and Slovakia it has fallen to third place, and in Hungarian and Czech schools it is scarcely studied at all. That said, Russian still serves as a common language among older central Europeans schooled in communist times—including, ironically, the politicians whose generation helped drive out communism.

The limited enthusiasm for German in central Europe has been much more surprising. Even in the communist era, it was taught at least as widely as English, being the language of a “fraternal” country, East Germany. In the post-communist era, Germany has been central Europe's biggest export market, and a huge investor in the region. Yet only in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia does the proportion of secondary-school pupils studying German come anywhere close to the proportion studying English; and nowhere in the region is German the top choice.

German has languished partly because Germany has been shy about promoting its language and culture in a region ravaged by Hitler's war. No such shyness has affected France. Its cultural diplomacy in the region has been vigorous and generous. Handsome French cultural centres ornament the capitals of the region: the newest of them will open in Riga, the Latvian capital, in October. But admiration for France's culture does not translate into widespread use of its language. Only in Romania—whose own vernacular is of Latin origin—does it exceed English in popularity.

The choice of English has been made easier by the demands of foreign investors. The first to move east were the most international European companies, which tended to use English as their international working language regardless of their base. The biggest foreign direct investor within central Europe for most of the past decade, Siemens AG of Germany, an engineering and telecoms firm, made English its main “corporate language” in 1998. “German companies are very pragmatic,” confirms Bernhard Welschke, head of European policy at the Federation of German Industry. They value a single language for business, he says, even if it is not their own.

The rise of English as a lingua franca will not necessarily do much to diminish arguments over national languages within or between countries, in places like the Balkans or the Baltic states. Such arguments tend to be about the division of political power between rival communities, rather than about language as such. It may, on the other hand, have a big impact on the institutions of the European Union, and even on European integration. The EU recognises an official language for every country, and translates all main public documents into all 20 of those languages. But civil servants and committees within the EU's institutions use three main working languages: English, French and German. French has long been fighting a losing battle against English for “market share” among the three, with German far behind. The arrival of more countries favouring English will threaten to render French almost as marginal as German.

One big question now is whether the generalised use of English as a first or second language will accelerate the political integration of the EU. The spread of English will lower the language barrier which has, arguably, obstructed pan-European political debate. It will open the way to the formation of pan-European public opinion, and to politicians with pan-European appeal. But there have been empires, like the Soviet one, which had common languages and still fell apart. A language can help a good political system work better, but it cannot rescue a bad one.

English is the dominant global language. The dominance of English as the world's lingua franca continues to grow, with the number of pupils studying French dwindling every year. The predominance of English on the internet, the relative ease of learning basic English and the perception that English is “cooler” —thanks in large part to popular music and films—means French is becoming more and more restricted to older generations and the upper classes of many countries where it used to be the second language of choice in schools.

French is losing ground fast. French remains a beautiful language much appreciated by the upper class but it is losing ground in curricula, even in areas near the French-German border. French is still holding up compared to Italian and Spanish, but that may change. Given the difficulty of French grammar and spelling, many prefer not to learn French. A teacher from the Spanish town of Burgos said most of her colleagues agreed that French was “in free fall”.

In Brussels, 3,000 less elevated officials have benefited from free French classes and recently the campaign has stretched beyond the EU's diplomatic arena to an advertising campaign designed to persuade young people in the new member states to learn French. Photographs of individuals lost in the desert are accompanied by a slogan in French saying: “Don't wait until you feel lost to learn French.”

### 3. A Global Language

Globalization, made possible by new forms of transport and information processing, may explain the need for a common tool for communications, but it doesn't explain why the tool is English. The answer may lie in the inherently English nature of the very tool that has created the new possibilities for planetary trade: technology has been created in English.

Within this contradictory mix of global networks and local identities, language plays a critical role. The intersection of language with international networks and globalization is perhaps most evident. Put simply, global trade, distribution, marketing, media, and communications could not take place without a *lingua franca*. These processes of globalization over the last thirty years have propelled English from being an international language—like French, Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic to becoming a truly global one, spoken and used more broadly than probably any other language in world history. 85 per cent of international organizations in the world make official use of English, at least 85 per cent of the world's film market is in English, and more than 65 percent of scientific papers in several important academic fields are published in English. Given the vast global presence of English at the time of the birth of the Internet, as well as the leading role of US scientists and engineers developing the telecommunications industry, it is not surprising that English rapidly became the de facto lingua franca of online communication. Today, English is probably used on about 50% of Web sites and perhaps upwards of 90% of sites used for international e-commerce.

The rapid growth of languages other than English online is a reflection of several phenomena, including a demographic spread of the Internet from its early base in North America to much of the rest of the world. This is also a reflection of a broader media trend known as localization. Just as CNN and MTV first globalized their distribution (in English), and then “re-localized” in a variety of languages, so are Yahoo, Google, and other Internet giants relocalizing their product in different language versions.

Apart from being widely used and known, English is extremely unsuitable as a universal language. There are several reasons to this. Any national language, i.e. a language which is or was originally the language of a particular tribe or nation, has obvious defects when used for international communication:

Native speakers of the language are in a quite different position than others. Some people regard this as bad in itself, as contrary to the equality principle, but I think it is practical consequences that make it bad. Native speakers tend to use idioms and rare words and to speak too fast, unless they exercise conscious control over their language - and such control is difficult and unnatural when applied to one's mother tongue. This implies that in oral communication in particular native speakers of English often have worse problems in getting themselves correctly understood than nonnative speakers!

A national language carries with it the history of the nation. For instance, words and phrases have got, in addition to their dictionary meanings, connotations, colours and associations. This is an important cultural phenomenon which helps in keeping the nation a nation, but in international communication it is a burden.

One of the worst relics of English is the orthography. English has a very rich repertoire of idioms, and it typically has several words which have the same basic meaning but different connotations and stylistic value. Especially in international contexts you can never know what words mean to people with different backgrounds. This is of course an inherent problem in all human communication, but the nature of English makes it a really big problem.

English is an eclectic language which tends to borrow words from other languages instead of constructing words for new concepts from older words with derivation or word composition. The richness of the vocabulary results basically from word borrowing and implies that words for related concepts are typically not related to each other in any obvious, regular manner. Word borrowing makes a language more international in one sense, but in the essential sense it makes it less suitable for international communication, since learning the vocabulary is more difficult.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The battle over which language will become the next European Union language is not over and it will still continue probably, until somebody will come with a better solution. English seems a good solution at the moment, but it is not the best.

- English is also an easy language to learn. Compared to other languages, it conveys a lot in few words. English lacks the complicated verb tense switches of languages like French. French demands complex structures from the beginning.

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